CLAIMS

1. (Twice Amended)   A method of creating and processing over a computer network forms representing applications to different higher education institutions, comprising:

creating in response to a request from an applicant for an application to a first institution a first application form customized in accordance with the preferences of the first institution, the first application form including first form data fields for entering applicant information;

providing to the applicant over a computer network the first application form;

entering the applicant information in the first form data fields;

posting the applicant information entered into the first form data fields of the first application form to a server;

storing the posted applicant information in a database having a database field structure defined by multiple database fields, the database including multiple records, each record capable of storing information corresponding to each of the database fields;

creating in response to a request from the applicant for an application to a second institution a second application form customized in accordance with the preferences of the second institution, the second application form including second form data fields for entering applicant information, at least one of the second form data fields corresponding to applicant information not entered into the first form data fields;

automatically inserting into some of the second form data fields applicant information from the database;

providing to the applicant over a computer network the second application form;

entering applicant information into the second form data fields into which information was not inserted from the data storage or into which the data inserted from the data storage is to be changed;

posting the applicant information entered into the second form data fields to the server; and

automatically storing the applicant information entered into the second form

data fields into the database by adding new records to the database, the automatic storing of the applicant information not altering the database field structure, thereby allowing new form data fields corresponding to applicant information not previously requested to be added to an application form without requiring alterations of existing application forms or of programs that access the database, whereby customized applications to different institutions share data through common, extensible data storage.

2. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which creating a first application form customized in accordance with the preferences of the first institution includes generating a first application in accordance with stored application description information and in which a modified first application can be generated by modifying the application description information without rewriting the computer program that creates the first application.

3. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which posting applicant information entered into the first form data fields of the first application includes verifying that pre-specified application information is present and meets pre-specified criteria.

4. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which posting applicant information entered into the first form data fields of the first application and posting applicant information entered into the second form data fields of the second application each includes the steps of posting data from a single page of the application and of posting data from the completed application, and in which posting a single page includes verifying that some specific information is present and meets pre-specified criteria and in which posting data from the completed application includes verifying that the information meets criteria specified by the corresponding institution.
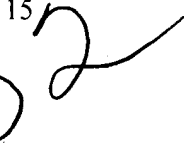
5. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which creating an application form customized in accordance with the preferences of a first institution includes creating an application form identified with the brand of the first institution and in which creating an application form customized in accordance with the preferences of a

second institution a second application includes creating an application form
identified with the brand of the second institution.

6. (Amended)   The method of claim 1 further comprising transmitting the
applicant information to the first institution in a first format specified by the first
institution and transmitting the applicant information to the second institution in a
second format specified by the second institution, the second format being different
from the first format.

7. (Amended) The method of claim 6 further comprising making applicant
information from multiple applications to the first institution from different
applicants available on line to the first institution for analysis after transmitting the
applicant information to the first institution.

8. (Amended) The method of claim 7 in which making applicant
information from multiple applications available to the first institution includes
making application information selectively available to various personnel at the
institution.

9. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which automatically storing the
applicant information is performed by a third party application servicer.

10. (Amended) The method of claim 9 in which posting the first applicant
information and posting the second applicant information include paying application
fees for the first and second applications and in which the third party servicer
processes the application fee.

11. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which storing the posted applicant
information in a database having a database field structure defined by multiple
database fields includes parsing the applicant information within a into data
elements, the data elements being separately stored and identified, thereby allowing
the data elements to be separately retrieved and rearranged in subsequent
applications.

12. (Amended) The method of claim 11 in which automatically inserting applicant information from the database includes automatically inserting applicant information representing combined elements into a single one of the second form data fields.

13. (Twice Amended) The method of claim 1 in which:

the first form data fields include first form data field labels;

at least some of the second form data fields include second form data field labels different from the first form data field labels for form data fields corresponding to the same data; and

storing the posted applicant information and automatically inserting into some of the second form data fields applicant information from the database are independent of the labels used in the first application form and the second application form,

thereby allowing each institution to customize the appearance of its corresponding application, while still permitting information to be shared across applications.

14. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which the first form data fields and the second form data fields are formatted and in which at least some of the second form data fields are formatted differently from the corresponding first form data fields and in which storing the posted applicant information and automatically inserting applicant information from the database is independent of the data field format, thereby allowing each institution to customize the appearance of its corresponding application, while still permitting information to be shared across applications.

15. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which providing the first application form comprises providing multiple form pages and in which posting the first applicant information to a server includes posting multiple form pages to the server.

16. (Amended) The method of claim 15 in which the content of a page of the first application depends upon applicant information posted in a previous page of

the first application.

17. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which the database includes a relational database or XML data.

18. (Amended) The method of claim 1 in which the database stores metadata describing the data.

19. The method of claim 18 in which the metadata includes validation rules for the data.

20. The method of claim 18 in which the metadata specifies the sharing between applications or the accessibility of the data.

21. (Twice amended) A system for creating and processing customized forms for unrelated institutions using a common third party data storage over a computer network, the system including:

a server computer operated by the third party and in data communication over a data network with a client computer for requesting a form and for entering information onto the form;

first data storage in communication with the server computer and including form description information specifying the content and appearance of each customized form;

second data storage in communication with the server computer and including user information posted from the client computer, the second data storage including a database having a database field structure defined by multiple database fields, the database including multiple records, each record capable of storing information corresponding to each of the database fields; and

a forms engine program operating on the server computer for generating a form from the form description information in response to a request for the form transmitted from the client computer over the computer network, the form including fields for the user to enter user information, the forms engine program automatically populating the fields for user information with user information available from the second data storage, accepting user information entered on the form by the user, and

storing the newly entered information in the second data storage for automatically populating subsequent forms, the user information entered by the user including at least some information not entered on a previous form by the user, the forms engine automatically storing the entered information into the database by adding new records to the database, the automatic storing of the user information not altering the database field structure, thereby allowing new user information not previously requested to be added to a form without requiring alterations of existing forms or alterations of programs that access the database.

22. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 in which the forms engine program generates a form that includes branding information identifying the particular institution to which the form is directed.

23. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 in which the forms engine program generates customized forms that include labels for data entry fields and in which at least some of the labels are different for the same user information on different ones of the customized forms.

24. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 in which the same user information is requested using differently styled menus on different ones of the customized forms.

25. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 in which at least some of the user information is parsed into smaller elements before storage, the smaller elements being stored in the database and being individually retrievable for insertion into subsequent forms.

26. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 in which the user information stored in the second database is in the form of user attributes and in which at least some of the user attributes have properties that specify information about the attribute.

27. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 further comprising means for transmitting in a format specified by the institution information user data from a

completed form to the institution associated with the form.

28. (Twice amended) The system of claim 21 further comprising means for verifying information in a form, the verification means including verification criteria common to all forms and verification criteria for a specific institutions.

29.   The system of claim 21 in which the forms engine generates a form comprising multiple pages and in which the content of at least one of the multiple pages depends upon previously supplied user information.

30.   The system of claim 21 in which the first or second data storage comprises one or more XML files stored on a computer readable medium.

31.   The system of claim 21 in which the first or second data storage comprises one or more relational database tables stored on a computer readable medium.

45. (Amended) A method of providing customized applications to institutions, the applications sharing a common database, the method comprising:

providing at least two application information files, each describing a customized application for an institution;

providing a database for storing applicant information entered on an application and for providing applicant information for inserting into subsequent applications, the database having a database field structure defined by multiple database fields, the database including multiple records, each record capable of storing information corresponding to each of the database fields;

generating a customized application in response to a request over a computer network from an applicant, the application form and content being specified by one of the at least two application information files, the application including multiple form data fields for entering applicant information;

populating the form data fields of the customized application using applicant information from the database;

transmitting the customized application over a computer network to a requesting applicant;

completing form data fields of the application that were not populated with applicant information from the database, at least one of the form data fields corresponding to applicant information not entered into the form data fields of an application previously completed by the requesting applicant; and

automatically storing the applicant information entered into the form data fields into the database by adding new records to the database, the automatic storing of the applicant information not altering the database field structure, thereby allowing new form data fields corresponding to applicant information not previously requested to be added to an application form without requiring alterations of existing application forms or of programs that access the database.

46. (Twice amended) The method of claim 45 in which completing fields of the application that were not populated from the database includes overwriting with new values fields that were populated from the data storage, the new values being stored in the data storage in place of the existing values.

47. (Twice amended) The method of claim 45 in which providing a database for storing information includes providing a database that is extensible without reprogramming the program for generating the customized application, thereby allowing an institution to readily request and store new information not previously stored.

48. The method of claim 45 in which generating a customized application includes generating an application that includes the logotype of the institution.

49. (Twice amended) The method of claim 45 in which the database stores metadata describing the data.

50. (Twice amended) The method of claim 49 in which the metadata describes permissible values for the data and further comprising comparing the applicant data in the completed form data fields with the permissible values.

51. (Twice amended) The method of claim 49 in which the meta data describes conditions under which questions on the customized application are

displayed .

52. (Twice amended) The method of claim 45 in which the database includes a relational database.

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53. (Twice amended) The method of claim 45 in which the database includes XML data.

54 The method of claim 45 in which the customized application includes multiple pages.

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55. The method of claim 54 in which the content of one of the multiple page depends the fields completed by an applicant on a previous one of the multiple pages.

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